New coronavirus cases set record in Thailand's capital

7 May 2021, by Chalida Ekvitthayavechnukul

In this Tuesday, May 4, 2021, file photo, a health worker administers a dose of the Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine to residents of the Klong Toey area, a neighborhood currently having a spike in coronavirus cases, in Bangkok, Thailand. Thailand sought Thursday, May 6, 2021, to assure its foreign residents that they can get COVID-19 vaccinations, countering comments by some officials suggesting they would be at the end of the line for inoculations. (AP Photo/Anuthep Cheysakron)

Health authorities in Thailand expressed concern as they announced Friday that the country's capital has confirmed a record 869 new coronavirus cases as it battles a resurgence of the pandemic. The city reported 18 new deaths.

Taweesilp Visanuyothin, a spokesman for the government's Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration, said Bangkok has recorded more than 500 new cases every day since the beginning of this month, with no sign of decline.

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration announced Friday night it will extend restrictions that were due to end May 9 until May 17. They include limiting restaurants to takeaway meals, closing 35 types of venues including bars, gyms, stadiums and boxing rings, and limiting the operating hours of other businesses.

Bangkok currently has 496 patients in critical condition, a number that is straining the capacity of hospitals to provide ICU beds. Anyone in Thailand who tests positive for the virus, even without symptoms, is supposed to be hospitalized, so there is a shortage of hospital beds for non-critical cases as well. Almost 30,000 patients, including 1,170 in critical condition, are in hospitals and field hospitals around the country.

Field hospitals have been established in several cities including Bangkok. Taweesilp said the government center is trying to set up a new one in the capital with more than 1,000 beds.

Thailand reported 2,044 new cases and 27 new deaths nationwide on Friday, bringing the total since January last year to 78,855 cases and 363 deaths.

Thailand's recent coronavirus wave originated in upmarket entertainment venues in Bangkok in late March, and has spawned clusters in several crowded slum communities.

The government of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha managed to contain the coronavirus for much of last year, with relatively small numbers of cases and deaths. But after a wave of infections hit a crowded community of migrant workers near Bangkok late last year, the government has been criticized for failing to secure adequate supplies of vaccines.

Just a bit more than 2% of the population has received vaccinations, and inoculations on a large scale aren't scheduled to begin until next month.

Prayuth's government is promoting a prayer session at Buddhist temples and online on May 11, in the stated hope that it bring people peace of

mind and help them get through the coronavirus crisis together.

The government's board on tourism policy, meanwhile, endorsed a four-phase plan to reopen the country to foreign tourists. Currently, foreign visitors with vaccination certificates are allowed to enter but must then undergo quarantine. Starting next January, vaccinated tourists are to be allowed to enter all provinces without being quarantined.

Regularly scheduled passenger flights into Thailand were stopped in April last year.

The tourism industry is a major employer and generator of foreign exchange for Thailand.

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